

First Sunday in Advent

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[0 : 00] Why don't we pray and ask the Lord's blessing as we enter into his word. Father, we thank you for yet another Sunday where we can gather as your people and consider the words of your Holy Scripture.

Lord, by your Holy Spirit, we ask that you would minister to us this morning, that you'd open our eyes to truth that we have either grown cold to or maybe have never considered. And Lord, we pray that we will be not just hearers of the word, but forever, forever, Lord, we will be doers of the word. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. If any of you have watched, it was a couple of years now, The Last Dance on Netflix, it's a great documentary.

The language is not great. A bunch of basketball players, and they're not holding back. But it's about the last championship run of the Chicago Bulls in the 90s. If you've seen it, you'll remember that what ended that dynasty had more to do with internal politics, the struggle in the locker room with management, than it did with the 20-odd teams that also played in the NBA that season. In a big way, the Chicago Bulls, they were unbeatable that season. They were excellent. But the team suffered from internal strife.

[1 : 27] Management sparred with players, coaches, with management. And eventually, the team, before the start of the season, it was broadcast that this would be the last run.

It's a great life lesson for us, in general, when we consider the importance of unity, conflict resolution, and team over self, in general, in life.

That oftentimes, when we fail, a good amount of the time, it's because of own goals. Things are going, by and large, okay.

We trip ourselves up. I bring this up this morning because we enter into Acts chapter 6, where the church will face yet another conflict.

Not round three with the Sanhedrin, but the third conflict that they will face will be from within. I mean, thus far, there's been a highlight reel of the church.

[2 : 37] Boldness of the apostles in front of the Sanhedrin twice. Incredible boldness. Times of wonderful prayer of the Holy Spirit visiting the church.

Opposition, and yet the spread of the gospel continues to go forth. New converts, new converts, thousands of people, many men, women, and children, confessing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jerusalem has been turned upside down. The ministry of the word that is preached and taught by the apostles from the scriptures, it has proven extremely fruitful.

However, an issue has arisen from within that had the potential to do what the Sanhedrin couldn't. Really, to trip up and, I don't want to say destroy the church, but certainly, certainly splinter it. You may remember that the ministry of the word, it has been front and center thus far in Acts, but only a few, in fact, only two specific references to the ministry of mercy that has happened in the church.

[3 : 56] There's been just summary statements that talk about how nobody was in want or people sold everything they had and distributed among the poor. So there's two different ministries at work within the early church.

Both the ministry of the word and the ministry of mercy or the ministry of charity were key to the obedient faith life of God's people. And why wouldn't it?

The church is to pray, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And in heaven, there is no want. In heaven, there is no hunger.

There is no rich or poor. There is no elite and lowly. And the community of God's people are to reflect that reality.

The new community that is marked by the death, resurrection, ascension of Christ was to be a community of mercy and equality.

[5 : 02] No one was supposed to be overlooked. There would be no wants. And yet, and yet, an issue arose because a group of widows were overlooked.

So what would happen? This internal problem had the potential to do great damage because it threatened to create factions and power struggles and tribalism within the church.

So unity would be broken and there would be little pods or groups of people that would have conflicting interests that weren't looking to bless but to consolidate power and to look out for themselves.

So the text will shed light on God's heart for the broken. That's what we'll see in this as we take a deeper look into it. It'll shed light on God's heart for the broken, his love for unity in his church, and his commitment to the ministry of reconciliation, the ministry of evangelism, of the word.

So, for the sake of simplicity, we'll break the section into, the text into three sections. The first, we'll look, it'll just be verse 1, the deep problem of overlooked widows.

[6 : 19] The second will be verses 2 to 6, and it'll be the wise solution of needed administration. And finally, verse 7, the godly result of continued proclamation.

So, let's just jump right into it, the deep problem of overlooked widows. If you have a Bible, please turn with me to verse 1 of chapter 6. Pause real quickly there.

The Hellenists, it's a catch-all term for Greek-speaking or Greek-encultured Jewish people. The church, at this point, had not spread, by and large, to the non-Jewish world, the Gentiles.

So, when we see the Hellenists and the Hebrews, it's specifically talking about Jewish people.

Some from the Greek-speaking world, and then those that are native to Jerusalem and the surrounding areas.

So, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So, we learn that Greek-Jewish widows were not being cared for the same as the Hebraic-Jewish widows.

[7 : 39] In all likelihood, given that in the first part of verse 1, that the disciples were increasing in number, it's a good possibility that this was just a mistake.

They, that is, the apostles, couldn't create the structures of distribution fast enough to address the growing number of people that needed mercy or charity.

It could very well also be that there was prejudice against the Greek-speaking widows. I mean, the text, it doesn't say, so, at best, we are only at liberty to speculate.

But regardless of the reason, the problem was, the problem was that Greek-speaking widows weren't getting the food and the resources that they needed.

That they were being overlooked. The problem was a legitimate one. And it was starting to cause internal strife. The Greek-speaking folk in the church were saying, what's the problem with our people?

[8 : 41] Why can't you supply the needs for the Greek-speaking widows? And you can picture in your mind the Hebraic widows saying, at the expense of, or the Greek-speaking Jews, at the expense of our widows.

And all of a sudden, we have a faction starting. We have not a unified group of people under the lordship of Christ, but we have interest groups. They do not get along.

They are not in solidarity in any sense of the term. But they're in opposition. So the apostles had to get this right. They had to get this right because factions were a huge problem.

But they also had to get this right because what we have here is a litmus test for how God's people understood their own relationship with God and how they were to express their faith in response.

So what do I mean? Throughout the Old Testament, widows, also orphans and foreigners, they were often mentioned as vulnerable people that had nobody to advocate for them.

[9 : 50] They didn't have resources, no ability to work. They were people that were extremely vulnerable to swindlers and scammers and people that would take advantage of them in their helpless estate.

Unless they had a wealthy benefactor, they were subject to begging or getting some kind of money from the temple.

They lived in poverty. And in short, they were helpless. The care of widows is a major biblical theme because it reflects who God is, who he has chosen to reveal himself as, using the language of a caring and protective husband.

Also, God, he talks about himself being an advocate for those that have injustice committed against them, that have no voice. So God does not stand idly by when injustice and neglect are evident. And especially when that happens to the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner. So here's some of these scripture verses. There are a ton I could have picked from. I picked three that communicate the heart of God.

[11:04] So Deuteronomy 10.18, speaking of God. He, God, executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

Deuteronomy 24. Malachi 3.5, Then I will draw near to you for judgment.

I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless. You feel God is, he is a, he is a good father to the broken and the vulnerable. You feel God's passion, his care.

If you remember the Exodus, in addition to all this, you remember the Exodus, it was a prime example of the Lord showing his kindness to a helpless people. Remember, widows are helpless, but so too were the people of Israel when they were in Egyptian slavery.

[12:27] They cried out to God in their helpless estate, and what did God do? He rescued them out of Egyptian slavery. The helpless had a voice. They had an advocate.

So it was supposed to be the same with the church. For the church, like the widow, like the orphan, like the foreigner, like the people of Israel in Egypt, they are a collection of helpless people.

Helpless to fight against the sin in their own lives. Helpless to fight against the power of death that claims all, and helpless to fight against the evil that is always encroaching.

The church is a collection of helpless people. And what does God do to helpless people? He saves them. And that's what he has done with the church through the cross of Christ.

So, the church ought to reflect, and imitate, and mimic the God who hears the helpless, who does not overlook the marginal.

[13:33] For God can't overlook the marginal. He sees all and knows all, and because his very nature is that of love, he is compassionate and merciful.

He sees the plight of the downtrodden. And this is a wonderful truth for us to hold on to. He does not get compassion fatigue. God doesn't grow weary of doing good to those who need help.

God doesn't grow weary of doing good to those who need help. That's excellent news if you are overlooked. That's excellent news if you desire to be seen and understood. And that just seems to be an elusive desire because you feel forever overlooked.

Passed over. We have an internal, deep, in our DNA need to know that we matter, at least to somebody.

That we have a desire to be, ultimately, to know God and be known by Him. And this is something that is just way more evident in widows.

[14:39] So on the need to be seen and understood, not too long ago, I was talking to a friend of mine, struggling to understand the purpose of what God has with, for them in a daily struggle, in their daily struggle, especially when God could easily remove the daily struggle.

So what is the purpose of it? What is the meaning of it? Why must I go through this daily grind? This is the conversation. So we talked, I asked questions, and my friend shared.

And really, it was like a good half an hour discussion. And in the end, my friend told me that they felt heard and understood any feelings of being alone or passed over or overlooked were gone.

And I bring this up, not to talk about how great a listener I am, because to be honest, I'm a so-so listener. But I bring up this example, because it's a good one, because I had the privilege to witness somebody blossom when they were heard and understood and seen.

I saw this person blossom before my eyes. It was a, I don't know, it was a very, I'm sure it's happened in the past, but it was a unique moment. At least I saw it for what it was.

[16:01] Well, for you, when you've felt broken and a kind word or somebody sitting beside you, listening to you, not necessarily offering advice, but interested in you, how has that affected you when you needed it?

The apostles, you see, they couldn't afford to mess up the distribution to these widows because they were to imitate God. They were to, in a sense, have the church have a little bit of a foretaste of what heaven would be like, a little taste, a little sample.

they were to care for the helpless as those who were themselves once spiritually helpless and, to be perfectly honest, still helpless.

The problem could have the potential to compromise the very gospel message and undo the church. So, if that's a problem, and it seems to be a glaring problem, it's not just an issue of, hey, we need to get these widows fed.

It's a much bigger problem, and indeed it was. So, what would be a suitable solution? And this brings us to our second point, the wise solution of godly administration or delegation.

[17:19] Verses 2 to 6. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles and they prayed and laid their hands on them. So, the apostles, they recognized that the problem was a real one. But they weren't the ones to address it.

They were very honest with their ability, their calling. They were laser-focused in a sense of obeying Christ and His calling on their lives. They understood their limitations.

[18:31] It's not that in any way in this text do we see a downplaying or a minimizing of the importance of the ministry of mercy. It just wasn't their ministry. The apostles were called to prayer and to proclaiming the word of God.

They had to be true to their calling because it was Christ's calling on their lives. So, the apostles, they don't on one hand ignore or downplay the issue.

Instead, they call a council. They see that the problem has the potential to snowball both in terms of the potential for factionalism or tribalism, splintering, disunity, but also they see it as a potential problem in that it will distract them from doing their calling.

That is the proclamation of the word. They communicate that they see the problem but they also communicate that the solution cannot be found in them. So, they call the council together.

And this is wise because it means everybody has a say both the Hellenists and the Hebrew speakers. everybody has a place at the table to solve an issue that affects everybody.

[19:46] Calling a council has always been the way the church has solved huge issues. Now, this isn't like the first council was the Jerusalem council we'll read in the future but this is kind of like it.

There was an issue that was a problem that had to be solved and a council was called. There was no tyranny here. There was no strong arming by the apostles but they invited the entire group of disciples to participate.

As a minister of the Word and sacrament my ministry is to primarily lead our congregation as an under-shepherd to the great shepherd Jesus.

So, I trained and was examined and called to teach God's Word to administer the sacraments to intercede for you all provide spiritual counsel when needed and encourage evangelism and to keep Christ lifted high through the proclamation of the gospel.

And that doesn't mean that I do not touch anything administratively. In fact, in many ways the first year or so of planting the church and a bit before I felt like I'd almost do only administration.

[20:57] There's seasons for that. So, I do participate in that but that is not my calling. My calling is the ministry of the Word and sacrament.

And to be perfectly frank with you guys you guys make this pretty easy. It's a wonderful group of people we have. We're in a sweet season of the church plant.

Many of you serve in one or more areas and have rolled up your sleeves to help out in remarkable ways. I mean, maybe if I spent 10 minutes thinking hard I could come up with an example but I can't think of an example of somebody kind of rolling their eyes or kind of doing something begrudgingly here in this church.

There's a real joy in how people serve. It's a wonderful thing. Folks have spearheaded ministries of mercy. They have helped with kids ministry. You guys have given your time and your talents and your resources in various ways.

And honestly, genuinely, thank you for that. Keep doing it by the way. But friends, we'd be foolish if we thought this would always be the case where things would always be sweet.

[22 : 11] That we'd always forever have a sweet season in the church. See, as we grow, when I was training early, early, early in the church planning, somebody said something very wise to me about how communities are built.

I've shared this with some of you if you were around in the early days. When you gather a group of people together, and then you have pseudo-community. Things are nice, you know, friendly, there's new people, we're Christians, I'll pray for you, sure, let's grab coffee.

And then conflict happens. Why? Because you are sinners. And so am I. But we're sinners, so what happens? And then conflict happens, and then we have an opportunity to either deal with the conflict in a godly way or leave.

And if we deal with it in a godly way, we have real community. But the thing is, this isn't a closed-off church. We have an open door, an unlocked door in this case.

We have an open door in our church. So that means new people come in and then all of a sudden we have community mixed with pseudo-community, mixed with conflict, mixed with potential resolution or people leaving, and it's a big, giant mess.

[23 : 21] Sometimes. We are in a sweet season of the church, but it might not and likely will not be this way forever. Factionalism in the church is a real thing and the fear is that those that are called to mercy ministries will be distracted and I will be distracted from the ministry of the word.

These are very real threats to the spiritual growth and health of our church. It's a real, real problem. Not an impossible one. Why?

Because we are called, all of us, to imitate Christ. We have been given his Holy Spirit and hear these words of Christ himself from Matthew chapter 20 starting in verse 25.

He's saying this to his disciples. You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.

Verse 28, Even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. That is the very animating force behind why all of us serve in the church because we are imitators of Christ.

[24 : 48] And our king, our leader, our shepherd, our captain, our savior, he served. He takes off his outer garment and ties a towel around his waist and he cleans the stinking feet of his disciples before he goes to the cross.

He laments in the garden that the cross before him was so intense and heavy and yet he still went. He took beatings upon his back and on his brow and on his face and hung on the cross and did not call for an army of angels to take him down.

But he stayed. And why? Because the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Friends, we will have various opportunities to serve both inside and outside the church.

Our driving force in serving, it has to be the imitation of Christ who is the servant of all. When conflict comes in this church, when frustration with each other might come in this church, we serve one another.

We don't bicker and grumble. There's a whole history of Israel grumbling in the desert and that did not go well with them. They did not see the promised land. Let us instead take the posture of Christ and serve one another.

[26 : 23] So, we have a problem that has been identified, the solution that has been suggested and implemented, the appointing of the seven. Now, what do we see as a result?

Look with me finally in verse seven. And the word of God continued to increase and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

So effective was the solution that it resulted in continued growth in the church. So the words increased and multiplied in their original language in the original common Greek.

The tense that is used for both of these words conveys a continuous and ongoing spread and growth. It continued and there's an ongoing increase.

There's an ongoing multiplication. And remarkably, even some of the Levitical priests came to obedient faith. Now, I mean, maybe, but likely, unlikely rather, that this is a reference to the Sanhedrin, any members of the Sanhedrin.

[27 : 30] You would remember that some members of the Sanhedrin were of the priestly class, but there was also a whole class of priests in Jerusalem, hundreds and hundreds that would take turns participating in the work at the temple.

And these priestly class were almost certainly not people of lots of means. If you are familiar with the Bible, when God is divvying up the promised land, the Levites don't get a portion of the land. The Levites are the priests. The Levites, the priests, don't get a portion of the land, but the rest of the nation of Israel, the people of God, are to take care of them. So the priests act on behalf of God, but the people provide for the priests.

But by and large, these priests, given their number, would not have been wealthy. They would have relied upon charity as well.

They were kind of like helpless widows, not necessarily as they lost a spouse, but they were helpless. In the church, the priests may have seen a community that reflected the call of God, the reflection of God, the committed heart of God to care for those who could not take care of themselves.

[28 : 51] themselves. And again, this is speculation, but that must have been a beautiful and exciting thing for people that were marginalized. In essence, these priests, they were witness to a faith that was truly obedient to and reflective of the heart of Christ himself.

So in our cultural moment, a situation like the one we have in chapter 6 of Acts would potentially be met with grumbling, disruptions, and calls for an upheaval of the power structures of leadership. Down with the Hebrews, they've been in power too long. They've always oppressed us. Maybe, maybe not. But without a doubt, if it happened today, it would dissolve and devolve into a type of tribalism where various factions claimed various grievances.

And tribalism and factionalism unfortunately are an all-too-common solution in our current cultural moment because they stress differences, constantly criticizing, tearing down without a viable and healthy vision of what things ought to be like.

There's no solution. For it never builds, it only dismantles. But consider the vision that Christ has for His church. And it's not just this tiny group of people because the church, especially at the tail end of chapter 6 with the martyrdom of Stephen, 6 and 7 rather, with the martyrdom of Stephen, the church will spread and spread all through Europe and church history tells us into parts of what is now India, all over the known world.

[30 : 40] So this vision that Christ has for His church, really for the human race, is of unity. Where in Christ Jesus real unity exists without the elimination of difference.

Historic and current issues and grievances do not, should not, find their way into the church. So for instance, it should happen and I would love it to happen if, and you guys know my background, if I could worship alongside of an Arab born in Nablus in our church, that would be a beautiful thing. It would be a wonderful thing if this was in the deep south in the 40s or 50s to see a black man and a white woman together worshipping the same God.

Still black, still white, still Jewish, still Arab, but the dividing line is destroyed in Christ Jesus. See Galatians chapter 3.

See Ephesians 2, 3, and all of Ephesians. Why? Because we actually hold one thing in common. We are unified on one thing, that we are sinners, that we have fallen short of the glory of God, that we are in deep need of a Savior.

[32 : 01] And the other thing that unifies us is that God has sent a Savior for us. All distinctions and divisions are obliterated by the cross because we are unified on the issue of sin in our helplessness.

So you see, in a very real way, the entire human race is just a giant collection of orphans, widows, and foreigners. Helpless people in our sin and slavery to death and evil.

But Christ Jesus, by hanging on the cross, being buried, resurrecting to new life, ascending into heaven, sending the Holy Spirit, He removes our sin, He conquers death, and He defeats evil so that the orphan is adopted, the widow protected, and the foreigner is made a citizen.

It's a beautiful thing about the Gospel. And friends, this reality must mark the Church. It must animate our decisions as we grow and consider mercy ministries, evangelistic endeavors, catechism to old and to young, Sunday worship, midweek study, whatever it may be.

We must fight against a pseudo-community that is a counterfeit for real and godly community. So, as we seek to obediently live out our faith together, we ought to expect that in God's way and in

God's time, we will see continued increase and multiplication of disciples.

[33 : 35] That we will grow in our love for Christ, our love for one another, and however many God chooses to give us, grow in number. If we stay focused on the things that He has called us to focus on, and we deal with issues as they arise.

And by God's strength, we'll do that. Amen? Let us pray. Father in Heaven, we thank You for all of Your many blessings in the early church, that You do not spare in Your Word the difficult passages, the uncomfortable and ugly passages.

Lord, Acts 6, verse 1, could have been really, really bad, and yet, in Your goodness, You brought this wonderful reality to bear on the church that increased ministry.

Lord, let us be people that see need, that see opportunities to serve and serve with joyful hearts, that do not flee conflict, nor do we run to it with swords drawn, but Lord, we look to You for resolution.

Father, that we would trust that You will build Your church, that You love our church, that You will continue to love our church until eternity, for this church is the very body of Your Son.

[35 : 03] So, Lord, we pray that You bless us this morning and bless us as we go forward. In Christ's mighty name. Amen.